

FIGHTING FOR VETERANS' HEALTH

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DNJ photo by Aaron Thompson

Jeffrey Condit is a former York VA Medical Center psychologist who testified before a congressional panel about problems that he saw there.

VA horrors prompt House funding bill

Former York employee's testimony included abuse, staffing shortfalls

By **SCOTT BRODEN**
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Lack of proper staffing at York VA Medical Center caused one patient to die and another to endure feces that was not cleaned from his back, a former employee recently told a congressional panel.

Testimony of veteran abuse and

findings that many VA centers, including the York VA in Murfreesboro, are in disrepair prompted a House of Representatives vote Friday to improve funding for veterans and address a backlog of disability claims.

"The 532,000 veterans in Tennessee deserve more than backlogs

and inadequate care," said Rep. Bart Gordon, D-Tennessee, who voted for the bill. "They have made tremendous sacrifices while serving this nation, and they deserve to know their medical needs will be met when

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they seek care."

The goal of the legislation is to "make sure you don't have Walter Reed-like scandals come up in the VA system," Gordon's press secretary, Julie Eubank, explained.

Health care for the nation's veterans has been rocked in recent months by accounts of shoddy treatment at the Department of Defense's Walter Reed Army Medical Center and similar claims at VA centers.

Jeffrey Condit, a former 16-year psychologist at the York VA, spoke May 15 as part of a group from the Veterans Administration Whistle Blower Council about abuses he's seen firsthand at the facility.

A former veteran who was wounded while serving in the Vietnam War, he provided counseling for patients and employees before finishing his career nearly 15 months ago.

"Because of staff shortages and unrealistically high workloads the general work milieu became unhealthy and, at times, dangerous for patients and staff alike," Condit said in his testimony. "Veterans were

York VA Medical Center By the numbers

Address: 3400 U.S. Highway 231 (Lebanon Highway)

Acres: 400

Square feet: 1 million

Employees: 1,127

Patients treated in 2006:
39,466

found unwashed and, in some cases, to have live maggots in their ear canals. Still other veterans were verbally and/or physically abused."

His testimony followed a Department of Veterans Affairs report in March that found "substandard cleanliness conditions" at veterans health centers in Murfreesboro and Nashville. The report pointed to half a dozen problems — some serious, some cosmetic — and called for a five-year renovation plan.

In Murfreesboro, patients have been unable to use the hospital's therapy pool since February 2005 because it is housed in

a building so rundown that it isn't safe to enter. Inspectors also concluded that both facilities need fresh coats of paint, new carpets, new waiting room furniture and other upgrades.

Staffing shortages

Condit said the problem with staffing shortages has been going on for about a decade because of a federal initiative to improve efficiency.

The staff for the Tennessee Valley Health Care System, which oversees the facilities in Nashville and Murfreesboro, has decreased by about 25 percent since 2004, yet the case loads have increased by 30 percent during a time when veterans are returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Condit said.

"Something has to give," Condit said. "What gives is the psychological and physical health of the staff. The rank and file clinical staff are not the problem. They are dedicated, loyal and capable clinicians. The problem rests with the leadership at the hospital level, and the leadership at the regional level."

The staffing levels are critical when VA employees are having to treat veterans dealing with post traumatic stress disorders, Condit added.

The York VA Medical Center has 1,127 employees out of about 2,800 overall in the system, said Ann Brown, admin-

istrator for the Murfreesboro veterans hospital. The Murfreesboro staff provided care for 39,466 patients last year out of about 82,000 seeking treatment in the system.

"The Tennessee Valley System has increased staffing by 129 employees in the past two years," Brown said Friday.

Bonuses questioned

Another problem involves administrators giving each other high bonuses when money is needed to maintain the hospitals, Condit said.

"The primary problem is with managers and administrators managing books," said Condit.

Former York VA Medical Center Director David Pennington, for example, received a \$9,000 bonus last year, according to the Associated Press. Pennington's boss, John Dandridge Jr., received a \$24,000 bonus for overseeing VA hospitals in several states from a Nashville office.

Pennington, who retired May 31, declined to comment at that time.

He was also in charge of a VA hospital in Nashville and nine community outpatient clinics in the Tennessee Valley Health Care System covering Middle Tennessee and parts of southern Kentucky.

Condit also complained that Dandridge has an office in a high-rent area by Vanderbilt University instead of being ac-

cessible in a VA hospital.

Dandridge was not available for comment for this story after Condit's issues were mentioned to VA spokesman Chris Alexander Thursday.

Condit said he's brought up the staffing and management issues many times through the years. He wrote a memo on April 15, 2002, about his concerns, and that led to a team including Condit being appointed to study staffing. The team completed a 26-page report about the problems, but management ignored the conclusions, Condit said.

"Because of my sounding the alarm regarding the unstable conditions at my hospital, I was not included on important committees, and I was consistently passed over for deserved promotions," Condit said.

Proper staffing is the biggest key to avoiding problems, Condit said.

"I know of a veteran who passed away a few years ago, and that could have been avoided with proper staffing," Condit said.

Help on the way

The bill approved Friday by the House provides the single largest funding increase in the 77 year history of the VA and includes provisions that would:

- Add more than 1,100 new claims processors to reduce the backlog of claims

from veterans seeking disability and other benefits.

- Help to address health care needs stemming from post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and lost limbs.

- Improve the health care records system to ease the transfer of medical records from the Department of Defense health care system to the VA system.

- Fund maintenance of VA health care facilities to prevent scandals such as what occurred earlier this year after an investigation of conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

- Support the development and operation of a phone and Internet hotline for veterans to report deficiencies in VA medical facilities and care.

- Increase mileage reimbursement for qualifying veterans who must travel to a VA facility for services.

"We often honor veterans with our words, but this bill will help to honor them by our actions," said Gordon.

The bill has widespread support from veterans groups, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America and AMVETS.

— Scott Broden,
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